

ATHENS (PART II): PREACHING TO A HEATHEN PEOPLE ACTS 17:22–34

Introduction

The message to the heathen people is a message that should be heard by every unbeliever.

- I. Paul preached in the meeting of the Areopagus (v. 22).
- II. God was sought by man (v. 22).
- III. God was not hidden, not unknown (v. 23).
- IV. God is the Creator (vv. 24-25).
- V. God guides the history of all men and nations (v. 26).
- VI. God has a great purpose for creating man: to seek and know Him (vv. 27-28).
- VII. God now demands repentance (vv. 29-30).
- VIII. God has set a day to judge the world (v. 31).
- IX. The results of the message (vv. 32-34).

I. Acts 17:22 *Preaching the Gospel*

Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus, stood up ready to preach. He stood where so many of the world's great philosophers had stood, philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. They had expounded the great thoughts of their philosophies; now Paul was about to proclaim the great truths of God. The official court sat before him and a large crowd of interested philosophers and poets and citizens surrounded him. There they sat and stood, all heathens, completely void of any knowledge of the living and true God. The most momentous moment of their lives was about to take place. They were about to hear the most glorious news ever proclaimed to man: God had revealed Himself and made Himself known to man. He had sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to earth to save man from sin, death and judgment to come. God was deeply concerned with the welfare of man. Paul's message included eight points.

II. Acts 17:22 *Man, Seeking God*

God was sought by man. Note the words. *You are very superstitious, very religious (hos desidaimonesterous)*. The word can be equally translated either way. The fact that man is religious and superstitious reveals he is searching for God. Men worship because they seek God. Their hearts...

- are restless, searching for peace and life with God.
 - are hungry, seeking to have God's care and provision.
 - are fearful, seeking to have God's protection.
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Job 28:12, 28 “But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell? And he said to man, ‘The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.’”

Jer 8:20 “The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.”

Amos 5:8 He who made the Pleiades and Orion, who turns blackness into dawn and darkens day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land – the LORD is his name.

III. Acts 17:23 *The Unknown God*

God is not hidden, not unknown. As Paul had walked throughout the great city of Athens, he had read many of the inscriptions written on the monuments and idols. One in particular had caught his attention: the altar “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (AGNOSTO THEO). Note several facts.

1. The word *objects* (ta sebasmata) means something of worship such as idols, altars, images.
2. The people acknowledged there was an unknown god, and they worshipped him. But they did not know him.

None of the gods satisfied the people. Their lives and their religions were still empty and missing something. The restlessness, hunger and fear were still in their hearts and minds, especially in lonely moments. None of the religions or gods created by man’s imagination satisfied and met their needs. All they could do was worship *an unknown god*; they knew nothing about him, yet they worshipped him.

Note what Paul did: he declared that he knew the unknown God. He personally knew Him, and it was He whom Paul declared.

Judg 2:10 After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel.

Jer 4:22 “My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good.”

Rom 1:14-16 I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

1 Cor 15:1-4 Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance : that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

VI. Acts 17:24–25 *God, the Creator*

God is the Creator. Paul declared six significant points about God as Creator.

1. God made the world and everything in it (cosmos, the whole universe). The point is striking. There is only One God, One who...

- is supreme
- is absolute
- is all powerful
- is all encompassing
- has created the world (cosmos, universe)
- has created everything in the world
- has created man himself (who is part of the universe)

Neh 9:6 *You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.* (see Acts 14:15)

Heb 11:3 *By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*

Gen 1:1 *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

Note the point: if there is only One Supreme God, then there are no other gods. All other gods are false. They are only the creation of man's mind and the object of man's desires.

Thought 1. Men of every generation need to heed this point, for men worship many false gods and idols. They put their trust and confidence in the things of this world such as...

- money
- education
- position
- self
- clothes
- property
- religion
- cars
- houses
- government
- fame
- mankind

Any of these and a host of other things can become the *gods* of present day man, the primary objects of his trust and attention, energy and efforts, hope and confidence. But note the declaration of Paul: there is only One God; only One who can look after and take care of man; only One who created the universe. There is no other God worthy of the trust, worship, time and energy of man.

2. God is the Lord of heaven and earth. He is the Master, the Ruler over all. The point is clear. As Lord, the Unknown God of man is the One to whom all men owe their allegiance and worship. Men are not to bow before nor serve any other god. (See *Lord*, Acts 2:36.)

1 Tim 1:17 *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

2 Chr 20:6 *And said: "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you."*

Exo 15:18 “The LORD will reign for ever and ever.”

Psa 22:28 For dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.

Psa 24:10 Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty – he is the King of glory.

3. God is the Creator, not the created. He does not live in temples built by man’s hands.

=> Man’s ideas and imaginations about God *are not God*. Man cannot create God out of his mind.

=> Man’s temples built to hold the presence of God *cannot contain God*. God is above the heavens. He is the Creator, the Lord of heaven and earth.

Thought 1. Men often worship what they have *made with their hands* and minds. It may be a man-made religion or some man-made thing in the world. Whatever it is, it is false. It is only a creation of man himself and cannot do him any good beyond this world. There is only One God, and He is the *Creator* of man, not the *created*.

Gen 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Neh 9:6 You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

Job 26:7 He spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing.

Psa 102:25 In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.

Acts 14:15 “Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.

Heb 11:3 By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

4. God is the Self-Sufficient One. He needs nothing. Men may think God needs them, their lives, worship, offerings and service; but God does not need men. He needs nothing that man has. Man cannot help or benefit God at all.

The point is shocking to the mind of man. It means that all man is and has, himself and his world, are *free* gifts of God. God has made man because God is loving and gracious and giving, not because He needs man. Man has nothing to offer God; man does not exist because God needs him. Man exists because God loves and wanted to demonstrate His love to man.

Mat 6:13 ‘And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’

Job 9:12 *If he snatches away, who can stop him? Who can say to him, ‘What are you doing?’*

Psa 83:18 *Let them know that you, whose name is the LORD — that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.*

Lev 25:23 *“The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.”*

1 Chr 29:14 *“But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.”*

Psa 24:1 *The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.*

5. God is the Giver of life and breath and everything else. He is the sole source of man’s existence, the One who gives and sustains life. Note: God is actively involved in *giving* three things to all beings...

- life
- breath
- everything else

Everything that man has and that concerns man comes from God’s hands. God is not remote, off in outer space someplace, unreachable. He is actively involved in the life of man, even in the very breath of man and in the giving of *all things*.

James 1:17 *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

Dan 5:23 *Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.*

V. **Acts 17:26** *God’s Sovereignty*

God guides the history of all men and nations. This is a phenomenal revelation.

1. All men come from one source, from God Himself. All men have the same blood and nature. No man or nation is above another. All are equal; all stand before God. No one is a favourite of God. God shows no partiality to one person over another: to Jew or Gentile, to religionist or heathen.
2. All men and nations are “determined a time” to live and are given “an exact place” within which to live. God oversees the birth and life of every person and nation. He is actively involved in the world and in the lives of people. Man just needs to acknowledge and reach out to Him and to Him alone; then man will come to know the glorious care and guidance of God’s hand.

Thought 1. Note how God is in control of human history, both of nations and of individuals. He rules over all, guiding and directing and keeping everyone within certain bounds. What is so desperately needed is for men to put their trust in God so that they may come to know His personal care in their lives.

Mat 6:13 *'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'*

Psa 29:10 *The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever.*

Psa 83:18 *Let them know that you, whose name is the LORD — that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.*

Psa 93:1 *The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.*

Psa 135:6 *The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.*

Dan 2:20 *And said: "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his."*

Dan 4:35 *All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"*

VI. Acts 17:27–28 Creation and Idolatry

God has a great purpose for creating men — that men might find and know God. Man should never have turned away from God and fallen into idolatry (see Rom 1:18-32). But since man has, he desperately needs to seek God, to do all he can to find God. There are two reasons given as to why man should seek to find God.

1. God is not far off. He is near every one of us. He can be found. How close is God? It is in God that we live, move and have our being. He and His works are all about us. If we only look, we can see how He gives and sustains our lives and movement. We will find Him, and once we have found Him, we can call upon Him and He will make Himself known to us. Note: men should see God in natural revelation, in the world all about them.
2. Man is the offspring of God (vv. 28-29). Therefore, man is responsible for seeking God. Paul quotes the Grecian poet Aratus (about B.C. 270). The point is forceful:
=> If man is the offspring of God, then idols are *less* than man, for idols are made by the mind of man. Man is superior to idols; therefore, to worship idols is to degrade the exalted position God has given man.
=> If man is the offspring of God, then something created by man is less than God. God is above everything man makes. Therefore, to exalt the works of man's hand above God is to degrade the exalted position of both God and man.

Deu 4:29 But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.

Psa 105:4 Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always.

Isa 55:6 Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

Hosea 10:12 Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unploughed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.

VII. Acts 17:29–30 Call to Repentance

God now demands that all men repent. There are two reasons why man is to repent.

1. Man is to repent because of his sin and idolatry. Man is not to worship idols of any sort, whether invisible or visible, of the mind or of materials, of the imagination or of the world. Note how the exhortation is worded: “We should not *think*,” to imagine that God is like gold, silver or stone made by art and man’s design. The word *design* (enthumeseos) means internal thoughts, ideas, imaginations. Every man has a *concept*, a thought about God. But we should not. We should seek and find the *only living and true God*. Every person is personally responsible for forsaking the idols of this world and for finding God. Man is now to repent.
2. Man is to repent because the days of ignorance are over. Before now, God *overlooked* (huperidon) man’s ignorance — not in the sense of closing His eyes or of condoning man’s idolatry, but He overlooked man’s ignorance until He could prepare man for the coming of His Son. *Now* God’s Son has come, and God demands that all men repent (see *Repentance*, Acts 17:29-30).

ACTS 17:29–30 REPENTANCE

“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” Acts 17:29-30

Repentance means to change; to turn; to change one’s mind; to turn one’s life. It is a turning away from sin and turning toward God. It is a change of mind, a forsaking of sin. It is putting sin out of one’s thoughts and behaviour. It is resolving never to think or do a thing again. (See Mt. 3:2; Lk. 13:2-3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 26:20.) The change is turning away from lying, stealing, cheating, immorality, cursing, drunkenness and the other so-called glaring *sins of the sinful nature*. But the change is also turning away from *the silent sins of the spirit* such as self-centeredness, selfishness, envy, bitterness, pride, anger, covetousness, evil thoughts, hopelessness, laziness, jealousy, lust.

1. Repentance involves two turns. There is a negative turn away from sin and a positive turn toward God. It is a turning to God and away from sin, whether sins of thought or action.
2. Repentance is more than sorrow. Sorrow may or may not be involved in repentance. A person may repent simply because he wills and acts to change; or a person may repent because he senses an agonizing sorrow within. But the sense or feeling of sorrow is not repentance. Repentance is both the change of mind and the actual turning of one's life away from sin and toward God. □

VIII. Acts 17:31 Day of Judgment

God has set a day to judge the world. The word “set” is significant. The day of judgment is set, already determined. Note three points.

1. The judgment concerns righteousness, how men have lived and behaved. Life does not cease at the grave (Epicureans; the pleasure-seekers), nor does life just pass into one large ball of energy with everyone entering into God. Life is purposeful, which means...
 - it is planned and guided by love and care
 - it is just and righteous

Mat 25:31-32 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

Rom 2:16 This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Rom 14:12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

2 Pet 3:7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

Jude 1:14-15 Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: “See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

Rev 20:12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

2. The Judge is Jesus Christ, the Man ordained by God (see *Judgment*, Acts 10:42).
3. The surety of judgment is the resurrection of Jesus Christ (see Acts 10:40-42. See Jn. 5:27-29.)

IX. Acts 17:32–34 Results of Preaching the Gospel

The results of the message. Note that Paul was interrupted and stopped from completing his message. The results were both tragic and wonderful.

1. Some sneered. In particular they sneered the resurrection. Most either felt life just ceased at death or else a person passed into some fluffy cloud, some half-slumber and half-conscious state of being.

=> The idea that life would be so purposeful that a man would exist forever — that he would literally arise from the dead and live in a perfect state of being — was just beyond their understanding.

2. Some put off making a decision. They were thoughtful, trying to grasp the message and think through the implications, what living a life of righteousness would mean, the great price they would have to pay. They just were not ready to make such a commitment, not yet.

Luke 13:25 “Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’”

Acts 24:25 As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, “That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.”

Jer 8:20 “The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.”

3. Paul turned away from them. He had done his duty, proclaimed the glorious message of salvation. Now it was up to the audience to repent or not.
4. Some believed. Dionysius was one of the judges of the great court of Athens. Damaris was the name of a woman. Respectable women of Athens would not have been in the market crowd listening to Paul. Therefore, she was probably a woman of immoral character. There were also others who were saved, but they were unnamed.

Thought 1. The gospel has the power to reach all: the high, the low and the unsaved.

John 1:12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Rom 10:9-10 That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

Rom 10:13 For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Eph 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. ■